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Reviewing Stand

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

The Role of the Artist in a Technological Society

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System planned in conjunction with the third in a series of six academic conferences being conducted by Northwestern University during its Centennial.

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The Role of the Artist

in a Technological Society

MR. MCBURNEY: Gentlemen, in opening our discussion, tell us what is art. How do you define art, Frankenstein?

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: There is no great basic axiomatic definition that can be wholly applicable, to which there are not some exceptions and to which there are not some foggy edges. I should say, in general, a work of art is a product of imagination and craftsmanship which is produced primarily for its own sake.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you go along with that, Jacobson?

'Renewal'

MR. JACOBSON: Yes, quite. I should say a little more. I should say art is not just something we find in museums and art galleries, or in old cities such as Florence and Rome. I should like to quote Herbert Read, whose definition I think is very excellent, "Art is more than description or reportage. It is an act of renewal. It renews vision, it renews language, and most essentially, it renews life itself by enlarging the sensibilities, by making men more conscious of the terror and the beauty and the wonder of the possible forms of being."

I should say that art is anything made by man that stirs our senses. That might be literature, music, poetry, architecture, ceramics, tapestry, painting; it might be a chair or a glass for drinking water, a lamp, an automobile, a bridge, a radio tower. Ozenfant says, "If it is art, it represents the apex of human effort."

MR. MCBURNEY: How do you see these definitions, Folds?

MR. FOLDS: I think I would agree with both of these. They are es-

entially the same idea. Jacobson has merely taken Frankenstein's definition and he has illustrated how that applies to more than what we normally call the fine arts. The important thing I think to realize here is that the artist doesn't create a work of art to please someone else, but for its own sake, as Frankenstein said. That seems to me essential to know. He makes it to move deeply. Whom does he move? He moves presumably those people who are willing to look at the work of art. How does he create the work of art? I think that question is important. I would like to quote from Picasso on that: "The artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place, from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider's web," and Picasso also points out that, above all, an artist works of necessity. What is important there is that the artist is not working according to formulation. He is frequently breaking new ground, and breaking new ground is disturbing to many of us who like to settle within old horizons.

Appeal to Intellect?

MR. MCBURNEY: When you say that art, as you did, Jacobson, appeals to the senses, that it is man made and something that appeals to the senses, would it appeal to the intellect?

MR. JACOBSON: Well, it has to appeal to the intellect through the senses, through the eyes or sense of touch. The intellect is simply a collection of experiences that we gather from the time we are born until we die.

MR. MCBURNEY: Would this appeal to the senses have any utility? Are art

and utility consistent or compatible? What do you think about that, Frankenstein?

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: Definitely. It seems to me also that the quality which distinguishes art from utility is something over and above its mere utility. An object can be useful without being a work of art; it can be a work of art and likewise be useful. There is an over-plus; there is a quality over and beyond utility which defines art.

MR. FOLDS: Someone once facetiously defined a work of art as that something that outlives its utility, which would indicate no one realized it was a work of art when it was being useful. Utility can help to shape a work of art. Any work of art is created within certain limitations. A black and white photograph uses no color, no pigment; a painting works only on a flat surface; architecture works in three dimensions but must make many concessions to social use; a chair must be something you sit in and is basically a symmetrical design. Utility, then, can be a part of the functional drive of a work of art. If the artist understands what he is doing, he can make use of this function as a part of the expression.

MR. MCBURNEY: How do you distinguish, Frankenstein, between good art and bad art? We often hear the expression, "great art" and the expression, "quality art." What do they mean?

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: One of the most important aspects of quality art is that it demands that one experience it more than once. It doesn't yield itself up immediately. It has mysteries about it that require repeated experience. One must come back to it over and over again.

'Sufficient Study'

MR. FOLDS: I am thinking of an interesting experience I had in the Chicago Art Institute two or three years ago. We were looking at the Chester Dale collection of modern paintings.

A number of people were going through rapidly and one man saw me making notes on one of the pictures. He said, "Mister, you seem to know something about this picture; at least you are interested in it enough to write down a few notes. Tell me what it is all about. What does it give?" I asked him, how much time he had, and he said, looking at his watch, "I have roughly seven minutes." I told him if he could come back with seven hours, we could get somewhere. After all, when you read a book, you don't look at the first page and the last page and then pronounce judgment on it, yet he was willing to pronounce judgment on a great French modern painting within a matter of seconds.

Abstract Art

MR. MCBURNEY: Was modern, abstract art the kind of art you were looking at in the museum that day?

MR. FOLDS: I don't think it was abstract art. All good art is abstract because the artist abstracts or he draws ideas and images out of his experiences in the world around him. To most people that would have been abstract or semi-abstract.

MR. MCBURNEY: Can this modern, abstract art ever hope to appeal to very many people, do you think?

MR. JACOBSON: I think it does appeal to a great many people. The museums all over the country, particularly in the small towns, are bringing this modern art to the people. Very beautiful prints are available which reproduce the originals almost exactly, and the magazines publish thousands of pictures every year which reach hundreds of millions of people.

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: Furthermore, we are seeing the influence of abstract art in commercial art and commercial design of every sort. It is seeping down into every conceivable level in artistic expression.

MR. MCBURNEY: I am thinking of a painting you showed me at our exhibit at Northwestern, Folds, and I must confess I couldn't appreciate it. Color

here and color there, paint here—I could see nothing in it at all. Is that kind of modern art going to have much of a following?

'Stylisms'

MR. FOLDS: It has a large following. It is a matter of education. In this generation, in fact, the generation before, we began to realize that the world is so complicated; today there are so many stylisms, historical stylisms we have inherited from the past that we as a people must know more about the arts, just as we learned four or five generations ago that we must learn to know some of modern literature. There was a time, you know, when universities had no courses in contemporary literature in their curricula. There was a time when one studied modern literature, English literature through Latin and Greek. Today, we realize that the visual arts must be studied from childhood on up, must be a part of our thinking and not something that is done after hours.

MR. MCBURNEY: Are you suggesting that you have to have that kind of education and that kind of background to appreciate art?

MR. FOLDS: Not necessarily. I don't mean all people ought to have a formal education. By and large, education doesn't come out of nothing. It is something one works for. Education is a part of what follows when you are through college or through high school. There are these great developments of adult education all over the United States bringing us closer to what the artist is trying to do. It is a process of learning.

MR. MCBURNEY: To whom is the artist trying to appeal, anyway? Is he trying to appeal to anyone? Frankenstein?

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: I should say the artist is primarily concerned in saying what he has to say within his own medium in the best possible way.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you think he has a responsibility to try to appeal to the public?

MR. JACOBSON: I think his first responsibility is to be true to himself. He has to decide what he wants to do with his life and devote himself to that. If he wishes to communicate, he will try to do so and then he will adopt a pattern along the lines that most people will understand; if he does not succeed in communicating this way, he must keep on trying. By being true to himself he will discover something of value for himself and eventually for others. No artist is so completely unlike the rest of the world that he won't say something that some of us can understand. He may not wish to communicate, in which case he is expressing himself as a noncommunicative person. Sooner or later, when he works with such integrity, he will discover something of value.

'For the Few'

MR. MCBURNEY: You gentlemen will forgive me, but from the discussion thus far, I get the impression that art is an esoteric sort of thing for the few, that it is something that appeals to those who have cultivated their tastes, that it exists in sort of a vacuum apart from the great unwashed.

MR. FOLDS: When you say "esoteric" I would say football is too. I am not interested in the opinion of a person who goes to a football game and sees it for the first time. He is seeing the spectacle, the men moving on the field, but the exciting and subtle plays going on are missed by this person. Is football esoteric, is music esoteric? What about the plays and movies we see and the books we read? All of those things we come to know through experience and the fact is that until comparatively recently, the visual arts, and music too, have been outside the educational experience of the American child and youth.

MR. MCBURNEY: Don't you think really great art, Jacobson, has an enormous impact on people quite apart from education? You were saying earlier that in the presence of

really great art, you take your hat off, you recognize it as such with or without an education.

MR. JACOBSON: It seems to me that is true. If you walk into St. Peter's at Rome and look at the magnificence of the proportions and the structure, and look at the paintings there, you are silenced, you are awed, you can't speak because you are in the presence of a terrific effort and a successful effort. If you should go into the caves of France where the early men painted their buffalo and their reindeer, you would be equally stunned and awed by the beauty and the wonders of these things. That is the kind of experience that gives us standards to go by. That is how we know a great piece of art and when we see it, it awes us, it elevates us, it moves us.

'An Experience'

MR. FOLDS: I would like to take issue a little bit with what Jacobson says. Fundamentally we agree, but St. Peter's as an illustration may be a little misleading. It is a great work of architecture, but it is vast in size. People going to see that would, of course, be impressed by the tremendous scale of the interior. They would be impressed by the paintings on the caves because they would have assumed that cavemen couldn't have painted, and here they see something which is to them excellent. However, I think it would be possible for the same people to go and see an El Greco and not be impressed, and yet if they had looked at the painting and understood what the painter is trying to do in this particular kind of painting, it would be as great an experience or as intense an experience as either of the other two. People who go to the Louvre don't necessarily buy post cards of the best pictures. It is quite revealing which ones the public does buy. They are the ones propagandized the most.

MR. JACOBSON: What you are saying now is the same as you said about football. You enjoy things you understand. You bring to a piece of art

your experience and you can only get out of that piece of art work what your experience brings to it.

MR. FOLDS: What you put into it.

MR. MCBURNEY: We are talking, as you know, about the role of an artist in a technological society. Do you think art as you gentlemen have been discussing it is consonant with a technological society, a society characterized by speed, mechanization, urban living, by complexity, stereotyping?

'More Leisure'

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: I should say in a democratic society the prime function of technology is to provide more leisure. Its prime function is to get over the drudgery of living as quickly as possible, to provide as much leisure for other things as possible. It also produces an increase in the number of things that are made available to us for contemplation during our leisure time. Consequently, we are faced with a certain confusion. We have an enormous conflict in the arts today hitting us from all sides, constantly appealing to us, asking us for such leisure as we have by virtue of the technological society. It is for that reason that education in the fine arts has come to be such an important thing. We must know how to use our leisure intelligently.

MR. MCBURNEY: Are we giving our leisure to the arts?

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: To an infinitely greater degree than we were.

MR. MCBURNEY: Another aspect of this technological society in which you ought to be interested, Jacobson, is mass production.

MR. JACOBSON: You were asking me before, has the artist a place in a technological society? What does it do to him? What can he do to it? The technological society is a wonderful place for him to be. He has a thousand new phenomena to examine and understand. He has the camera to record things that he couldn't pos-

sibly record; he has microscopes to see things he couldn't see before; the telescopes to see distances he couldn't imagine before; he has new tools and new dimensions. He can fly and he can go under the sea. He has magazine reproduction to repeat by millions the things he paints. He has the reproduction of print. He has projection machines which can enlarge his paintings to almost any size, and then he has the wonderful new television.

Mass Production

MR. MCBURNEY: I respect both points you men have made, the matter of leisure time which you can turn to art, and the availability of tools not possible before. Returning to this point I was about to make about mass production, for example, in the case of furniture, we are turning out chairs by the thousands in a single mold. In the old days each chair was fashioned for itself. In your own corporation, you are making boxes by the millions, I take it. Where does art enter into that kind of a production process?

MR. JACOBSON: It doesn't take any more money to print a nice thing on a box than to print a poor thing. Mass production has nothing to do with beauty. Anything that you can make, you can make beautiful and you can reproduce it on a large scale. This glass I have here is nothing more than a tumbler, it does nothing more for me than to hold water, but it could be a work of art so that when I look at it, I have great pleasure and when I touch it, I enjoy the feeling of it. The same would be true of a chair. You can make a chair that is simply a number of legs and backs put together in an uninteresting way. If Mr. Eames makes a chair of plywood and metal, it is beautiful. He makes it not only because it is beautiful, but because it can be mass produced.

MR. MCBURNEY: One thing has disturbed me. You pick up a glass and say, "This thing could be beautiful; actually it is ugly." You passed a

lamp post the other day and you said, "This thing could be beautiful, but actually it is ugly." Is ugliness typical in our kind of society? We seem to be encountering it on all hands.

Design

MR. FOLDS: I think there is a confusion between design for mass production and design for handicraft. Many of the things we see such as lamp posts are hangovers from the days of handicraft. The Windsor chair was designed for a particular kind of small shop production in the early part of the 17th century. The Eames chair was designed for modern factories with new material. To make a Windsor chair and have it turned out by the hundreds of thousands by modern methods, or any colonial or early 19th century chair which had hand rubbing on it, and produce a machine that would imitate the hand rubbing process of the early 19th century, is the sort of thing that leads us into this kind of a mess. There is a difference between the artist who paints a single picture, and the artist who designs or paints something that is to be reproduced on the cover of *Fortune* magazine. Many of the color reproductions we have today, for instance, work backwards from original paintings, but there are commercial artists, many in fact, who design for the printed page, just as Eames designs for mass production. Once we can clear up that point, it will help us.

MR. JACOBSON: I would like to add something I took from a recent work of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., connected with the Museum of Modern Art. He was talking about modern mass production. Compare two coffee pots, 1750 and 1950. The older silver pot is an elaborate symbol of aristocratic dignity, expensive to make and troublesome to polish: a showpiece. Its pineapple finial, foliate trim and membered moldings are reminders of classical influence. In the newer stainless steel drip pot, coffee is made as well as served. Convenience and efficiency are expressed rather than

dignity though the bold sensible forms are eminently graceful. Joints and edges are featured now as 200 years ago but today cleanliness, strength, and simplicity govern the detailing. Tough steel can be shaped thus only by machines more powerful than the hands that shaped the silver.

MR. MCBURNEY: You are an advocate of the newer coffee pot?

The Craftsman

MR. JACOBSON: I wouldn't say I wouldn't have a coffee pot made by the craftsman. It is the craftsman who develops the idea from the metal and the production man comes along and puts it into mass production.

MR. MCBURNEY: I still have the impression that we encounter an enormous amount of what you gentlemen call ugliness in these commercial objects, am I right or wrong?

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: We are encountering less in commercial objects than we formerly did—it takes a long time.

MR. JACOBSON: We are learning that modern design should express the methods used to make an object, not disguising mass production as handicrafts or simulating a technique not used.

MR. FOLDS: I should like to express the idea that the really good modern design is going back to the spirit of traditional design. We have had mass production before, not on as great a scale as today. The Windsor chair is one example. It seems to me what we have to do is to understand what is good basic design as opposed merely to covering something with historical mannerisms. There was a time when a bank couldn't be built without Greek or Roman columns on either side of the entrance. Automobiles have been revamped from the older forms of art. They could be improved in design. That is a matter of getting good design to work.

MR. JACOBSON: It must be made clear that aspects of the arts change, not because of fashion as is often thought,

but because the new conditions that affect society and the artist bring with them new demands.

MR. MCBURNEY: What attitudes do you encounter among businessmen, salesmen and other entrepreneurs in modern society, so far as art is concerned?

MR. JACOBSON: If I had to be brief about it, I would say most businessmen are shy about art and modern art in particular, although there are many exceptions. The shyness, I am afraid, is due to their ignorance. The main interests of most businessmen are production, administration, law, accounting, finance. They simply don't know what you are talking about when you talk about modern art. They haven't given it attention. That doesn't mean they couldn't be interested as they are very bright or they wouldn't be successful businessmen, but they have no standards of judgment.

MR. FRANKENSTEIN: I should say, however, that the great activity in the support of modern art through museums, through foundations, through universities and the greatest amount of the purchase of contemporary art comes from these very businessmen. There must be a very sizable minority of so-called practical men who have some understanding of art.

'Support New Ideas'

MR. FOLDS: I would say that we must teach all of our people, everyone today, to realize that there are artists among us who are constantly pushing towards new ideas, breaking new ground, and we must support those men as well as the artists who obviously work directly for production. We must realize that the painter is important; even though his painting hasn't an immediate commercial use, he must be supported just as the pure research scientist must be supported.

MR. MCBURNEY: How is this creative artist to be supported, the man who is producing, I take it, for the love of it, because he has something to say?

MR. FOLDS: He might be given an opportunity through teaching as a resident artist in a university. One way or another, depending upon his particular temperament, he should be encouraged. Some men can't teach and paint; some men can't do commercial art and sculp or paint; but somehow, we should keep it in our minds that these men are necessary, that we must plow new ground.

MR. MCBURNEY: Should society undertake to subsidize artists of the kind you are talking about?

'Subsidize Artists'

MR. JACOBSON: I think it does to a certain extent—subsidize people like that in museums and universities where artists live as resident artists and have time to study and do experimental work with their students and for themselves. There are scholarships and the Guggenheim fellowships, for example. Certainly, we do a lot for students. We look in the schools for the talented young people and we see that they get help during the student years. After that, they have to look after themselves. If they can

find people to support them, well and good, but the history of art shows that men worked because they had to work regardless of whether they were supported or not. You have Cezanne, Matisse, Van Gogh and all the rest. There are 30,000 art students today in Paris, and there must be 300,000 or 400,000 here. Who is going to support all of them if they don't make an effort for themselves?

MR. MCBURNEY: You make a distinction between the creative artists, Folds, and the commercial artists? I am concerned about this creative artist.

MR. FOLDS: I am too. I think that many commercial artists are creative artists too. The main problem of the commercial artist is that he is working for men frequently who are rather terrified of the mythical public taste. They will say to him, "You can't do that, that won't sell, but this will sell. You must cease being an artist when you work for me." The only answer to all of this, it seems to me is education, formal or informal...

ANNOUNCER: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but our time is up.



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Compiled by Eugen Eisenlohr
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
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Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. Museum. JOHN F. PETO; Catalogue of the Exhibition with a Critical Biography by ALFRED FRANKENSTEIN. Smith College Museum of Art, Mar. 1-Mar. 24, 1950. The Brooklyn Museum, Apr. 11-May 21, 1950. California Palace of the Legion of Honor, June 10-July 9, 1950 [Brooklyn, 1950].

Building for Modern Man, a Symposium. Edited by THOMAS CREIGHTON. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1949.

Something of the nature of architecture as it appeared to its foremost practitioners in 1947.

DANZ, LOUIS. *Personal Revolution and Picasso.* New York, Longmans, 1941. Foreword by Merle Armitage.

DANZ, LOUIS. *The Psychologist Looks at Art.* New York, Longmans, 1937. Definitions and a discussion of modern creative art.

GIEDION, SIGFRIED. *Space, Time and Architecture.* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1941.

An analysis of the new tradition in architecture showing its interrelations with other human activities. Emphasis is on what the author believes to be a hidden unity in an outwardly confused civilization.

KEPES, GYORGY. *Language of Vision.* Chicago, Theobald, 1944.

Illustration and comment on the shaping of sensory impressions into unified, organic wholes, or plastic organization; visual representation; and a dynamic iconography. Includes introductory essays by S. Giedion on "Art means reality" and by S. I. Hayakawa on "The revision of vision."

KOUWENHOVEN, JOHN A. *Made in America.* New York, Doubleday, 1948.

Points out a trend from the "cultivated" point of view toward that of an American "vernacular" in the arts including painting, architecture, music, literature and the various crafts.

LARKIN, OLIVER W. *Art and Life in America.* New York, Rinehart, 1949.

A history of the cultural development of America as shown in its architecture, painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts.

MOHOLY-NAGY, L. *The New Vision; Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture.* New York, Norton, 1938.

Written to inform laymen and artists about the basic elements of Bauhaus education in Germany which was based on a close connection between art, science and technology.

MOHOLY-NAGY, SYBIL. *Moholy-Nagy; Experiment in Totality.* New York, Harper [1950].

A biography of the great painter and designer whose work stemmed from that of the Bauhaus school in Germany.

OZENFANT, AMEDEE. *Foundations of Modern Art;* tr. by John Rodker. New York, Harcourt, 1932.

A book on aesthetics by a French painter who discusses not only painting, but sculpture, architecture, machinery, literature, music, science and philosophy in relation to the art of living.

READ, HERBERT. *Education Through Art*. New York, Pantheon, 1945.

Plato's thesis, that art should be the basis of education, translated into terms applicable to present day needs.

SAARINEN, ELIEL. *Search for Form: A Fundamental Approach to Art*. New York, Reinhold, 1948.

The sage of Bloomfield Hills, best known for his very personal type of architecture, discusses informally his conception of art as a whole and the principles of nature underlying it.

SCHNIER, JACQUES. *Sculpture in Modern America*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1948.

A survey of contemporary sculpture including major trends from "direct carving through abstract, surrealist and expressionist forms," changes in the training of sculptors, and new materials and their potentials.

American Scholar 19:434-42, Autumn '50; 20:39-49, Winter '50; 20:197-205, Spring '51. "A Discussion of Modern Painting." E. LEVY.

Follows the course of modern painting by means of short sketches of its adherent showing Cubism as Classicism, Expressionism as Romanticism, and the Surrealist and non-objective schools as Mystic.

Architectural Forum 73:175-6, Sept. '40. "Arts in the Preparatory Schools." T. M. FOLDS.

In a speech before the annual convention of the American Federation of Arts, Mr. Folds pointed out the advantages of combining in a school's studio, activities in many different art media and showed how a project in community planning could be made the focal point for such teaching.

Arts and Architecture 67:30, Oct., '50. "Architecture and Technology." L. MIES VAN DER ROHE.

A poem in blank verse showing the relation of architecture and technology.

Christian Science Monitor Magazine p. 4, Dec. 9, '50. "Manifold Forces of Thought and Feeling in Art; 300 Selective Works at Metropolitan Museum." D. ADLOW.

A comment on the exhibit of American painters from all sections of the country which showed the many types of painting in vogue at the half century. *College Art Journal* 9:158-167, Winter 1949-'50. "Historical Art and Contemporary Art." J. GARRISON.

A searching analysis of the attempt of the artist to project an integral segment of his identity and so establish for his time a sense of reality and satisfaction.

House Beautiful 93:98-9, Feb., '51. "Your Taste Is Better than its Reputation; Survey of Best-Selling Designs During 1950." J. M. BANGS.

From a survey of 46 manufacturers of home furnishings, *House Beautiful* found that the designs, colors, and textures having the greatest sales success were in good taste and beautiful.

Magazine of Art 32:342-7, Je., '39. "Art Before College." T. M. FOLDS.

Propounds the theory that art in college should be a follow-up of more elementary study rooted deep in the grades.

Magazine of Art 36:185-188+, My., '43. "A Consumer's Guide to Color Prints." T. M. FOLDS.

Traces the history of color-print reproduction, compares the various processes used, and points out why the public needs education in recognizing and demanding more accurate color-print work.

Saturday Review of Literature 33:74+, Dec. 2, '50. "What's New and Renewed; Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting at New York's Whitney Museum." J. T. SOBY.

Describes the dominant forces in American painting at the half century.



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